

"Making Hands" and Making Words

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ABSTRACT

Emerging signed languages have been documented to exhibit high degrees of sub-lexical and lexical variation for naming objects and often have multiple signs to denote a single referent (Osugi, Supalla, & Webb, 1999; Sandler, Aronoff, Meir, & Padden, 2011; Morgan, 2015). Additionally, some of these languages have been documented to not exhibit systematic phonological organization based on contrastive features of formational parameters, suggesting that words first emerge as iconic, holistic prototypes (Sandler et al., 2011).

I discuss the case study of San Juan Quiahije Chatino Sign Language (SQJCSL), or “making hands”, to talk about lexical variation. “Making hands”, an emic term, is a constellation of five family-based sign language varieties only two generations old, from an indigenous Mesoamerican community in Mexico (Hou, 2016; Mesh, 2017). Signers distinguish language varieties by families in co-residence and biological kinship, supported by evidence of kinship diagramming, residence mapping, and social networks (Hou, 2016).

A lexical elicitation study, however, reveals much variation in the degree of overlap among family language varieties for signs in three semantic categories (tools, food, animals). Some signs are adopted from gestures of the surrounding speech community. Moreover, some of the variation resembles an iconic patterning reported for other signed languages and no-speech gestures (Padden et al., 2013; Hwang et al., 2016). The patterning reflects human manipulation and perception of objects in the real world, e.g. handling of a hammer with pounding movement or depicting the round body of a mammal scurrying.

Many researchers have suggested that gesturers and signers draw from the same resources of the visual-manual modality, accounting for the similarities in gestures and signs. I propose that the mechanisms driving the production of manual words are externalizations of MIMETIC SCHEMAS (Zlatev, 2007) and VISUAL SCHEMAS. Mimetic schemas are basic-level categorization of actions in human experience and mediate the connection between embodiment and language. Visual schemas are essentially based on the generation of visual mental images from the user’s perceptual experience of the world. These schemas underlie pre-verbal conceptualization that forms language, preceding image schemas (Cienki, 2013). I argue that the formation of words is based on users’ bodily experiences of interacting with some objects and their visual mental images of other objects.

I also propose that the formation of words is organized by a motivated use of “phonological” handshapes, based on the cognitive phonology approach for signed languages (Occhino, 2016). Different phonetic properties of handshapes and the meaning of these handshapes give interpretation to what they represent. In the case of “making hands”, the signers abstract these handshapes over different groups of words, which are mapped from

mimetic schemas of manipulating objects and visual schemas of seeing objects. The abstraction of handshapes over words is based on motivated and iconic links between form and meaning, which has been documented for American Sign Language as well (Lepic & Padden, 2017).

The case study of "making hands" offers insight about how new words arise through complex processes of construal of the world, based on embodied, cultural, and social experiences of humans.

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